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Jacking the Dial: Radio, Race, and Place in *Grand Theft Auto*

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In December of 2005 I watched and took notes as a man named James carjacked a convertible that looked like it might be suitable for pimping. The clean-cut white guy behind the wheel was in the wrong part of town. As James tossed him from the car and drove away, the DJ on the local country station spoke through the car stereo: "It's like Kant said: you can be an active originator of experience or a passive recipient of perception. I tell the fellas behind the diner that all the time" (gameplay notes, 17 December 2005; Kant [1781] 1998). When the next country classic started, James flipped to the modern hip-hop station and stepped on the gas. He's a clean-cut-looking white guy himself, but his avatar, a young black gang member named Carl Johnson, is right at home in this neighborhood.[1]

The *Grand Theft Auto* videogame series has sold over 45 million copies worldwide.[2] It has attracted considerable media attention for its violence and sexual content, but few have explored the role of music in its appeal—despite the fact that players and industry reviewers often applaud the game's musical soundtrack system as an innovative design feature that improves gameplay immersion (Spence D. 2004). There is virtually no non-diegetic soundtrack music in the GTA games. Instead, the player hears music from game-specific "radio stations" that are only present in places where the game's characters might plausibly find them: in the gameworld's retail establishments, in the homes and cars of the avatar's allies, and in the cars that the player steals. In *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games 2004a), which James was playing, the music consists of licensed tracks spanning genres from country to house to hip-hop, all chosen to match the game's 1992 West Coast setting. GTA players can not only customize their avatar's hairstyle, tattoos, clothes, and stolen cars with the money they earn on their "missions," but when they're driving they can also choose the music to accompany their exploits.

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On foot, the city soundscape consists only of traffic noise, the comments of passersby, and occasionally the radio stations selected by non-playable characters. Players often comment on the "realism" of this soundtrack system; as one man wrote in a web-based survey response, "it fits in with the more gritty feel of GTA compared to other games—the stuff going on isn't something that merits an orchestral soundtrack, it's just stuff that happens while driving around" (David Newgreen, Melbourne, Australia, 18–21).[3]

The GTA games offer players the opportunity to explore iconic American cities at particular historical moments from a criminal underclass perspective. To date, the settings for the most popular editions of the game have been Miami in 1986 ("Vice City"), New York in 2000 ("Liberty City") and several West Coast cities in 1992 ("San Andreas" is roughly equivalent to California, featuring versions of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Las Vegas). Each game has an overarching plotline, but players have considerable latitude in choosing the order of the missions that advance the narrative. Between missions they are free to investigate the enormous virtual gamespace for their own amusement, experimenting with the avatar's physical capabilities and enjoying the over-the-top versions of American urban life created by the designers at Rockstar Games. The games feature an abundance of fast food restaurants, bad drivers, pedestrians having inane conversations, and outrageous radio advertisements that make fun of manipulative marketing campaigns: for example, a home-security ad for the "Executive Intruder Extermination Service" features an anxious upper-class mom consoled by an announcer who proclaims, "We'll ensure that you'll live in a fortress!" (transcribed from recorded gameplay). GTA also parodies many real brands, including Burger King, De Beers, and Nike. But the only direct product placement in the games is the music on the radio, a design choice that creates a powerful musical connection between the gameworlds and the real world.

The open-ended and ironic character of the GTA games invites players around the world to join game designers in collaborative performances that comment on American popular culture and politics. Here I rely on Deborah Kapchan's concept of performance: "aesthetic practices—patterns of behavior, ways of speaking, manners of bodily comportment—whose repetitions situate actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities" (1995:479). Like films, videogames reproduce actors' vocal and physical performances—the latter through motion-capture technology, which is responsible for the increasingly lifelike physical behavior of animated avatars. Game designers also build virtual sets, write scripts, and conduct research on historically appropriate costumes and music, as filmmakers do. But the reception of these performances requires a form of audience collaboration and complicity that is qualitatively different from the interpretive work of the "active audiences" described by film and television reception theorists (e.g.,

the contributors to Barker and Petley 2001). Each "audience member" for the GTA games becomes a guest star in a new rendition of the narrative, controlling the lead character and moving him through a pre-established story with some improvisational freedom. As Kapchan notes, repeated performances can become "the generic means of tradition making" (1995:479); elsewhere I compare GTA players to traditional storytellers, recounting a repertoire of tales not of their own making (Miller forthcoming). These performances may attract appreciative secondary audiences—friends or family who crowd around the TV or computer. Players also post evidence of their creative work to game fansites, in the form of stories, screenshots, or software "mods" (modifications), which can alter a game's code and create new content.[4]

This article investigates the musical choices made by GTA's designers and players in the course of their performances. Era-appropriate musical tracks and the radio format in which they appear play a key role in all the *Grand Theft Auto* games. The player-controlled radio stations not only increase the verisimilitude and immersive qualities of each gameworld, but also encourage players to associate particular music with particular characters and places. Moreover, in creating radio playlists that purport to represent classic country, reggae, rock, house, funk, hip-hop, and other genres with fifteen or so songs each, the game designers are constructing canons. Their playlists have instructional force, teaching millions of players how to recognize and value certain artists, songs, and musical characteristics within a given genre. The music industry itself also figures in the narrative of *GTA: San Andreas,* where gangsta rap production is presented as both an avenue of upward mobility for young black men and a cynical commercial enterprise that may entail sacrificing one's street cred and artistic integrity. *San Andreas* dramatizes various kinds of encounters with the commercial music industry, including the perspectives of the casual radio listener, the gangsta rap connoisseur, and the aspiring hip-hop artist. The game's protagonist is not a musician, but music shapes his personality and his terrain.

The interactive multimedia capacities and vast market appeal of videogames are making them a major new medium for music distribution worldwide, and the issues I will address here with respect to *Grand Theft Auto* have implications for the study of many other games. To what extent does music shape gameplay experiences, and how much agency do game designers offer to players? What motivates design decisions—for example, do the GTA radio playlists really represent designers' convictions about the "classics" of a given genre, or are they the product of more pragmatic licensing and marketing concerns? How might music impact a player's ability to identify with an avatar of a different race, gender, class, or historical moment? And how do players bring their musical experience in games to bear on their everyday musical practices as listeners, consumers, or music-makers in their

own right? More and more games have an explicitly musical focus, requiring players to dance, sing, play instruments, or compose (e.g., Sony's *PaRappa the Rapper,* Sega's *Samba De Amigo,* Konami's *Dance Dance Revolution* series, Harmonix's *FreQuency* and *Guitar Hero*). While the GTA games do not fall into this "music/rhythm" marketing niche, they do make music an integral part of everyday life in the gameworld—as it is in the real world.

Gameworld Ethnography: Dispersed Players, Shared Reception Frames

The gaming industry has clearly identified music as an area worthy of serious investment, but digital game scholars have been slow to follow suit. Musical and ethnographic approaches to digital gameplay have thus far been underexplored relative to narrative analyses that draw on literary theory.[5] Performance-oriented, music-centered approaches grounded in ethnomusicological methodology seem well-placed to bring new perspectives to this burgeoning field of cultural production and criticism. Such scholarship would necessarily investigate both game design and the gameplay experience—a daunting task, to be sure. The ethnographic "field" for this kind of work is dispersed around the globe; its research sites include a preponderance of internet-based communities as well as game development companies with proprietary data to protect.[6] Digital game ethnographers also face the same challenge as scholars of popular music reception: with millions and millions of media consumers scattered around the world, how can we make meaningful claims about common experiences or values?

Many ethnographers of popular culture now point to close work in particular locales as the literal grounds for their interpretive conclusions. As Martin Stokes writes, "The top-down perspective has been localized: Specific global projects are understood in specific institutional contexts" (Stokes 2004:50). In a sense I will do the same here: I address gameworlds themselves as bounded territories that engender shared experience. *Grand Theft Auto* players are a diverse and far-flung group—there are many fan collectives, but there is no unified GTA subculture (cf. Demers 2006 on *Dance Dance Revolution*). But this fact need not completely overwrite players' common experiences—their separate but parallel performances of particular stories in particular places. In terms of duration, agency, narrative constraints, character-identity, and playfulness GTA creates a different kind of common experience than that shared by the dispersed audience for a Hollywood release or by all the tourists who have visited the Eiffel Tower. Similarly, the games' virtual spaces frame musical reception in much more constraining terms than does the latest hit single. A commercial music release might reach listeners as a CD, an overplayed radio track, club music

for dancing, a legal or illegal download, the audio component of a music video, and so on. But the music of *GTA: San Andreas* reaches players as they actively navigate a particular digital city while occupying the virtual body of a particular twenty-something black man from "Ganton," clearly based on L.A.' s Compton. (For an extended discussion of GTA's gameworlds as ethnographic field sites and virtual tourist destinations, see Miller [forthcoming].)

My approach to this terrain mingles traditional ethnographic methods with techniques derived from the growing body of work on "technoculture" and popular media (e.g., Lysloff and Gay 2003; Danet 2001; Jenkins 2006). The routes of transmission for GTA-related practices and narratives include in-person performances, fansites, critical and laudatory media reviews, software mods, personal email, and casual conversation; each of these communicative contexts has the capacity to create interpretive communities around the games (Fish 1980). Accordingly, the material that follows draws on gameplay observation, face-to-face interviews with players, my own gameplay experience, web-based discussion forums, published game reviews, assorted personal communications, and the responses to a web-based survey in which I asked players about the GTA radio and their real-life radio habits. All of my research was conducted between 2005 and 2007.

My survey respondents were self-selecting; the resulting demographic data says more about the sort of person who would encounter and choose to fill out such a survey than about the tens of millions of people who play the GTA games. However, this circumstance also generated information on how such material circulates and attracts respondents. For example, successive waves of responses appeared in my inbox when I posted the survey on a GTA fansite; when it was discussed in several blogs (e.g., Thompson 2006); and when it was mentioned in the commentary thread for a FARK.com posting on videogame music (FARK.com 2006). As of this writing, I have received 84 survey responses, 80 of them from men. Occupations range from librarian to mechanic to film editor, but 52% are students and 20% work in information technology (including digital game design). They hail from at least seven countries—the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, and Poland—but the majority are from North America. Their ages are fairly evenly distributed from the late teens to the late thirties. Virtually all respondents own more than one GTA game, and the vast majority own and have played all the way through Grand Theft Auto III, Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, and Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. Completing the plotline of these games requires anywhere from forty to over a hundred hours of play, depending on the game edition (each gameworld is larger than the last), the player's skill, and his/her interest in optional side-missions and unstructured exploration. My survey respondents can be considered seasoned travelers in the GTA gameworlds, with a substantial common knowledge base.

In general, GTA gameplay creates an engaging tension between the pressure to conform to the standards of the avatar's social milieu—e.g., the Mafia or an L.A. street gang—and the appealing freedom of driving around a complex landscape, spinning the radio dial, and engaging in atypical social behavior (ranging from violence, larceny, and pimping to getting fat on fast food, running red lights, and dressing up in wild outfits). In every version of the game, the radio invites players to explore the role of music in their navigation of an unfamiliar landscape and their occupation of a foreign persona. Rather than giving the player cues to follow, such as ominous music when danger is approaching, GTA allows players to use music to channel their own emotional states. One 18-year-old survey respondent wrote, "For example, when I am angry because I had a bad day that day, or I messed up on a hard part of the game, I would change the music to 'boost' this aggression (and hopefully alleviate it quicker)." While critics have often suggested that violent videogames, music, and movies train young people to be violent in real life—sometimes implying that videogames in particular can cause people to behave like programmed automatons (CBS News 2005)—my research suggests that GTA players make use of these mass-media products in highly individual, self-aware, and media-savvy ways. Indeed, the "freedom" afforded by these games has probably been their most-praised trait across hundreds of reviews by professional industry critics and players alike.[7]

In playing the *Grand Theft Auto* games, millions of people are undertaking experimental, exploratory travels into unfamiliar terrain where their goal-oriented success and personal satisfaction depend upon their powers of interpretation and adaptation. GTA's "freedom" derives partly from its mediated, artificial qualities: players can control their degree of identification with local characters, choose their own preferred depth of immersion, and tack between viewing the games as consequence-free escape zones or as trenchant commentary on other violence-saturated media products (from action movies to the evening news). The in-game radio stations facilitate this process. Players use the real-world music, gameworld-oriented DJ patter, and parodic advertisements to shape both their sense of place in the gameworld and their ethical identification with the criminal characters they occupy.

The Gameworlds of *Grand Theft Auto*

While the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise now comprises seven games, three stand apart as a loosely related trilogy: *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001), *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002), and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004). The original *Grand Theft Auto* (1998) and *GTA II* (1999) set up the general game concept, but *GTA III* made the radical shift from top-down two-dimensional graphics to a 3-D urban landscape that could be viewed from a variety of

camera angles controlled by the player (cf. Strain 2003 on perspectival shifts across the history of cinematic film). *GTA III* vastly outstripped its predecessors in terms of sales and it established visual and narrative conventions that were retained and developed in *Vice City* and *San Andreas*. (See Table 1 for a chart of these three gamespaces and their radio stations.) It should be noted that these three games were rated M (for Mature/17+) by the Entertainment Software Rating Board for their violence, language, and sexual content; *San Andreas*'s rating was changed to AO (Adults Only) when a hidden scene involving explicit sex was discovered in the PC edition of the game after its release.

Table 1. GTA Gamespaces and Radio Stations

Game	Gamespace	Radio stations	Genres
GTA III (2001)	Liberty City	Head Radio	"nonstop rock"
	(New York, 2001)	Double Cleff FM	opera
		K-Jah	dub
		Rise FM	techno
		Lips Radio	"disposable"
		Game FM	hip-hop
		MSX FM	drum'n'bass
		Flashback FM	*Scarface* ('80s pop)
		Chatterbox FM	talk
Vice City (2002)	Vice City (Miami, 1986)	WildStyle	early hip-hop
		Flash	top 40
		K-Chat	talk
		Fever 105	R&B
		VRock	hard rock/metal
		VCPR	faux NPR
		Radio Espantoso	Latin
		Emotion 98.3	soft rock
		Wave 103	new wave
San Andreas (2004)	San Andreas	Playback FM	"classic hip-hop"
	(~California, 1992)	Radio Los Santos	"modern hip-hop"
	Los Santos = Los Angeles	Bounce FM	funk
	San Fierro = San Francisco	K-Rose	country
	Las Venturas = Las Vegas	K-DST	classic rock
	various rural counties	SFUR	house/techno
		K-Jah West	"dub/reggae"
		CSR 103.2	contemporary soul
		WCTR	talk
		Radio X	alternative rock
		Master Sounds 98.3	classic soul

Note. Genres in quotes are taken from game liner notes or from on-air station IDs. Stations are listed in the order in which they appear in the liner notes.

The production personnel employed by Rockstar Games varied somewhat across these three games, but the most senior figures always included the Scottish brothers Sam and Dan Houser and their English school friend Terry Donovan (three of Rockstar's founders, all of whom had previously worked for the media conglomerate BMG). Craig Conner and Stuart Ross wrote and produced original music for the radio stations (e.g., genre-parody pop songs and commercial jingles), while the American radio personality and technology critic Lazlow did much of the scriptwriting for DJ banter and commercials. Lazlow and Dan Houser were responsible for the overall design of the radio system. Game development companies work under grueling schedules to bring games to market as rapidly as possible; under the circumstances, Rockstar's investment in the GTA radio suggests it was a highly valued component of the games. The company's most senior staff were closely involved with radio production work, to which they brought their previous professional experience with music video direction and record label management (Design Museum 2002). Many employee hours were spent selecting and licensing era-appropriate music, writing DJ patter and commercials, and organizing hundreds of voice actors.

Rockstar Games has major offices in both New York and Edinburgh, and much of GTA's design and production took place in Scotland under the direction of British staff. Thus Rockstar's versions of New York, Miami, L.A., San Francisco, and Las Vegas are colored by European perspectives on American mass culture and consumerism. Britishness occasionally bleeds through the games' American facades: a fake pop song in *GTA III* includes the line "She swings her hips and her bits to the rock 'n' roll groove," injured characters spend time "in hospital," a *San Andreas* character has a washing machine under his kitchen counter, and the *San Andreas* instruction booklet refers to the "glitz and glamour [*sic*]" of Las Venturas/Las Vegas (Rockstar Games 2004b:5). These hints of the foreign are all the more striking because in many respects these games are about creating a sense of the local. "Immersion" is a key design aim for any digital game, and in the GTA cities a player becomes immersed by navigating through distinctive neighborhoods, using maps, and developing a sense of mastery and ownership over particular locales. (This is especially true of *San Andreas,* in which the player must acquire and continually defend gang territory.) At the same time, however, players are encouraged to think of themselves as tourists rather than locals. Each game's instruction booklet is designed as a mock tourist guide, offering tips for the newcomer who hopes to dabble in a criminal counterculture.

The GTA games offer a simulacrum of the ultimate tourist experience, that of passing as a native and gaining access to the gritty "real life" of one's destination. But by figuring the player as a tourist, GTA also preserves a layer of distance from the avatar's thuggish activities. This distancing effect is com-

pounded by the irony that suffuses the games. The *GTA III* booklet includes this description of an area called "Shoreside Vale":

> Suburban bliss and tranquility Liberty City style. Home to many of Liberty City's more affluent gangsters, Liberty City's commuter belt is a patchwork of swimming pools, picket fences, backyards, basketball nets, street gangs, and 5 car garages. It is littered with ostentatious mansions paid for in blood money, protected by high security guards and gates to keep out the gangs of bored teenagers looking for something to do to bring some excitement to their middle class existence. (Rockstar Games 2001:6)

This account not only parodies the effusive style of real tourist guides but nods to the stereotypical target market for violent videogames and music: bored middle-class teens. Rockstar provides its own players with a sense of cool superiority to that other kind of gamer, positioning them to recognize themselves as media-savvy, sophisticated tourists who can control their level of identification with the avatar at will. The in-game radio contributes to this process by both enhancing immersion and provides comforting reminders that this is all just a show, a collaborative performance about a comically corrupt and culturally bankrupt America. As an announcer on San Andreas's talk-radio station says, "Culturally, this country is flatlining! Now you know why . . . Opinions and talk that our sponsors agree on: WCTR."

Dan Houser, a Rockstar founder and vice president, has described GTA's humor as "leveled at the broader weirdness of America and American consumerism and American action movies" (Bramwell 2004). This is a crucial part of the games' appeal, for both Americans and international players. In-game commercial radio and billboards are the primary channels for the games' critical commentary; as such, they constitute GTA's political voice. And it is a pervasive and memorable voice: as an Australian player observed, apparently recounting a GTA ad script off the top of his head,

> [T]he ads and commercials seem very sarcastically patriotic, for example,
> "Mike, I can't feed the kids, and the rent's due!"
> "Are you saying this isn't the greatest country in the world[?]"
> "But Mike, my . . ."
> "Hold on a second. Everybody, USA! USA! USA!" (Justin Grima, Victoria, Australia, 18–21)

This ad takes place at a book-tour event for a conservative self-help author, apparently in a football stadium or similar setting. The book, titled *Rags Are Riches,* purports to teach the poor how to appreciate their poverty. In the ad, the author tells a homeless man, "Instead of complaining about being poor, enjoy it. Watch TV. Don't vote. Who cares?" A *game-brains.com* reviewer cited this ad to support his argument that *San Andreas* is "among the most politically engaged pieces of mainstream art to come along in the last ten years" (LaVigne 2005).

Nearly a third of my survey respondents were not American, and I contacted them to ask follow-up questions about what struck them as particularly American about GTA's gameworlds. They pointed to the radio DJs, the ads, racial tension, the highway system, and "seeing the police as 'the enemy'" (David Newgreen, Melbourne, Australia, 18-21). Virtually all of them also acknowledged that these are stereotypical visions of America; one player wrote, "San Andreas perfectly fits into the way the U.S. are portrayed, at least here in Germany, so it's hard to determine whether the general portrait is wrong, or if San Andreas is authentic" (anonymous male, 22-26).

The GTA gameworlds, their radio stations, and their avatars' personalities all grew more complex across the three games under consideration—as one would expect, since Rockstar needed to maintain player interest in the series. As company president Sam Houser said of the design process for *San Andreas,* "Our goal was to develop the key themes of Grand Theft Auto: freedom of choice and the ability to do lots of things closer to their logical conclusion; a bigger world, with much more to do in it; and much more interactivity between you and the environment, between player and lead character, and between characters within the game world" (Houser 2004). A brief survey of the games will serve to illustrate this design trajectory, which was characterized by ever-stronger connections between the avatar's character, his local terrain, his era, and what's on the radio.

GTA III is set in Liberty City, a thinly veiled New York. The game's time period is roughly contemporary with its 2001 release; Liberty City lacks the deliberately nostalgic period markers that are scattered throughout Vice City and San Andreas (such as comically gigantic cell phones).[8] Liberty City's nine radio stations also contain far less place- and era-specific music than in subsequent games. Many of the songs were written and produced specifically for the game; they are genre parodies of sound-alike commercial pop. The dub, techno, and drum'n'bass stations do feature a small number of real-life artists, but not in a realistic format—for example, all the tracks on K-Jah are licensed from a single 1981 album by the dub artist Scientist.[9] Flashback FM adds a little nostalgic depth to the line-up, as its name suggests, but its playlist consists exclusively of tracks from the 1984 *Scarface* soundtrack. Moreover, as a player pointed out to me, the inclusion of drum'n'bass, techno, and dub stations tends to mark the whole radio dial in this game as more British than American. In general, this material is not particularly representative of what was on the radio in New York at the turn of the millennium.

Despite its uneven verisimilitude and shortage of licensed tracks, the *GTA III* radio does possess some of the attributes for which the radio system has been praised in every version of the game. It provides comic relief and alleviates what Frasca has called "errand boy syndrome," the tedium of repeatedly traversing the same gamespace in the course of completing different mis-

sions (Frasca 2003). Lazlow's surreal political satire on "Chatterbox," Liberty City's talk-radio station, attracted a huge following and set the standard for the political content of subsequent games. Still, the radio in *GTA III* does not engender the intensely local and intimate sensibility that makes real radio such a powerful medium (Berland 1994). The glib irony of both this game-world and its radio dial undercut the game's capacity to create an immersive and dramatically engaging experience. Even the avatar is an empty shell—a generic small-time crook of unspecified white ethnicity, he has no name or voice.

In *Vice City*, the player's avatar has a bit more depth: he is Tommy Vercetti, a young mobster recently released from his first major stint in prison and deployed to Vice City by his Liberty City bosses to expand the family business. Tommy is voiced by the actor Ray Liotta, and he not only converses with other characters in "cut-scenes"—film-like segments that advance the game's narrative—but occasionally expresses internal thoughts in voiceover. Tommy has an ethnicity, if not much of a personality. As for the *Vice City* radio, it was produced by much of the same personnel as *GTA III,* but the end product is remarkably different. Vice City is 1986 Miami, and its music is place- and time-specific from the very beginning. The man who picks up Tommy Vercetti at the Vice City airport is listening to a salsa station. The first time Tommy drives a car the radio is playing Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean." Vice City's nine radio stations contain almost one hundred era-appropriate licensed tracks, from Twisted Sister to Grandmaster Flash to A Flock of Seagulls, all organized into fairly realistic commercial format radio playlists. A Spanish-language station, Radio Espantoso, represents a major step in linking the radio to the game's locale. There are only five original songs on the radio: three genre-parody Latin tracks and two songs credited to the fictional Scottish hair-metal band "Lovefist" (a kissing cousin to "Spinal Tap"). Lovefist's members are characters in the game; their songs appear amid the licensed '80s hits on the game's hard rock station, creating a musical bridge between Vice City and the real world. (Lovefist also serves to link *Vice City* and *San Andreas*; the band turns up late in the narrative of the latter game and its members become good friends with the avatar.)

The *Vice City* radio was an extremely popular aspect of the game, spawning a seven-CD soundtrack box set of '80s hits. It evoked nostalgia in at least two different generations of players: those who were teenagers in the mid-'80s and a younger cohort who remember many of these tracks as the music on their parents' car radios. A twenty-something player explained the attraction of *Vice City's* satirical '80s gameworld in an interview:

> Player: My mom is still in the '80s. She still wears the leather jackets with the bad hair . . . I don't know, I have this idea of the '80s as like, you know, the heavy metal bands, and they wore the really tight, the skin-tight pants that're

all pinned up the sides, with the tight shirts with the big collars—that's the '80s, to me.

[We discuss "Lovefist," who fit this description perfectly.]

Player: I love the '80s! They're funny! I was born in the '80s, I'm supposed to love them.

KM: So, there's a big kind of nostalgia factor.

Player: Yeah, I guess so—I don't remember the '80s at all, but, I don't know, I find I'm always attracted to, I like things that are cheesy, or that would normally be considered cheesy now. (Recorded interview, May 2006)

This player's delight in *Vice City's* campy, flashy aesthetic was typical of my survey respondents, many of whom also noted that they were too young to actually remember much about 1986. As one man wrote,

> Hearing the 80's music [in *Vice City*] recalls for me not the 80's specifically, but representations of the 80's—music videos, movies, and tv shows. These are all images that have been mediated and feel artificial to me, so the music helps to enhance the feeling of, not artifice, but playfulness in the game. The music emphasizes that what I am experiencing is not serious, so I can enjoy myself and do whatever I feel like, to my character and to the other characters of the game. (Jesse, Nova Scotia, Canada, 22-26)

In a game whose plot is largely oriented around contract killings, an '80s pop soundtrack and ads that skewer Reagan-era conspicuous consumption provide a welcome counterweight to stylized brutal violence.

But in terms of creating an immersive environment and a distinctive gameworld, *Vice City* is almost too successful in its mimicry of commercial radio. The stations serve up such a broad range of '80s hits that their nostalgia appeal becomes generic. Largely disconnected from Tommy Vercetti's character and circumstances, the radio speaks directly to the player on the other side of the screen. Players get a kick out of the music for their own reasons, without considering what Tommy Vercetti would listen to or what stations are appropriate to particular areas in the gameworld. Many survey respondents expressed their affection for the *Vice City* radio and praised its ability to capture an era, but no one reported any relationship between the radio and their identification with the avatar.[10] That identification was not particularly character-driven in any case; as one player explained in an interview, "[Tommy's] personality actually doesn't come across . . . He doesn't have a whole lot of personal style. His clothes are all purchased by other people, his cars are all stolen, he stays in a hotel, so you don't see any of his personal items" (recorded interview, May 2006).

In *GTA: San Andreas,* by contrast, the player's avatar comes with family, friends, and a substantial backstory. Carl Johnson, nicknamed CJ, is a young black man who has lived in Liberty City/New York for five years but must go back to the West Coast for his mother's funeral. In the city of Los Santos, which stands in for 1992 Los Angeles, he is subject to intense pressure to

return to gang life in his old neighborhood of Ganton/Compton. Corrupt police officers frame him as a cop-killer immediately upon his arrival in the area, and an older brother goads him with accusations that he abandoned the Grove Street Families gang when he moved east. He takes up residence in his childhood home, where we see him grieving over a picture of his murdered mother. His friends and brother still live in the neighborhood where he grew up; when he visits their homes they give him missions, many of which involve reclaiming Grove Street Families territory from drug dealers. All this makes CJ a very different kind of avatar from Tommy Vercetti.

CJ actually seems too real to some players; the race and class issues raised by the game hit too close to home to be funny. In an interview, a Canadian woman in her 20s explained why she laughs at the gender stereotypes in *Vice City* but is less comfortable with the gangsta scenario in *San Andreas.*

> Player: [In *Vice City*] I laugh at it because it seems really self-conscious. Like all the women that are always wearing bikinis. It's sort of like, this is fun and we're going to put it in, because mostly guys are gonna play this game, but we're going to take it a little far so that it's not quite serious ...
>
> KM: But then the thug aspects of San Andreas don't seem to strike you the same way.
>
> Player: Yeah, well, I don't know, it might just be that I don't like the game as much, but yeah. It seems a little, a lot more serious, especially with how popular R&B and things like that that are dominated by an *idea* of black culture? This sort of seems to be trying to actually fit into that, and actually *be* that and *represent* that sort of idea. It's like watching music videos of the guys with their big black Expeditions and their gold chains. Yeah, it seems like it's trying to be more realistic ... Whereas I mean Vice City is a lot easier to be a parody, because it's of the '80s, and the '80s were funny. [*laughs*] ...
>
> KM: So, do you feel like you identify with the avatar when you play? With his backstory and character?
>
> Player: Tommy? No, not really.
>
> KM: And CJ, to the extent that you've played with him?
>
> Player: No, not really CJ either, except for that I find—if anything, I have less of an association with his community and his motives and things, but then there are other things that he cares about, like he actually cares about things, whereas Tommy is sort of more of a straight-up thug, and he just wants the money back for revenge and honor and pride of place. Whereas CJ is sort of more motivated by, oddly enough, the emotional aspects of his associations with people. (Recorded interview, May 2006)

Like this new avatar, the *San Andreas* radio dial has a more defined, more complex, and in some ways more constraining character than in previous GTA games. Of the eleven radio stations in CJ's world, seven play hip-hop, soul, funk, dub/reggae, and house—genres intimately connected with urban black culture.[11] This music facilitates identification with CJ and his history, drawing the player into the gamespace instead of broadcasting out into the

living room. The hip-hop stations have particular resonance, since the four classic elements of hip-hop culture make appearances in *San Andreas*: DJs, MCs, graffiti, and competitive dance all play important roles, along with the sometimes-mentioned fifth element of sartorial style. Graffiti appears all over the gameworld; CJ can spray his own tags over those of rival gangs. He also engages in several dance contests, in which the player must follow scrolling screen commands to press certain buttons in time to the music. CJ doesn't have b-boy moves, but he's a good dancer; his easy grace on-screen stands in comic contrast to the tense button-mashing of the player at the controls (cf. Burrill 2006). And when CJ is left unattended—when the player leaves him standing somewhere without pausing the game—he will eventually sing little fragments of songs from the radio. Music, especially hip-hop, is integral to this avatar's character.

Unlike the previous GTA games, *San Andreas* allows players to alter the avatar's appearance in the course of quotidian gameworld life. CJ is always a young black man, but his look changes substantially when he works out at a gym, eats too much fast food, gets a new hairstyle at a barbershop, or buys new clothes at various retail stores in the gameworld. This new feature provides another level of "freedom" for players—akin to the freedom to choose among radio stations—and it strengthens the bond between player and avatar. Giving the player control over CJ's appearance may also have helped Rockstar avoid criticism for creating a racial caricature (this being GTA's first non-white avatar). Standard-issue CJ is a slim black man with short hair, a white tank top, and jeans; if players want to give him the huge muscles, gold chains, cornrows, and tattoos of a stereotypical street thug, they are the ones who carry the burden of representation. (See Miller [forthcoming] for player discussions of how to shape CJ's appearance.)

Picking the wrong hairstyle, body type, or clothes for CJ can reduce a player's rating for "sex appeal" or "respect"; the player's taste may not match that of CJ's friends and girlfriends. Here *San Andreas* both makes fun of American consumerism and functions as a taste-making apparatus: the game cultivates a sense of what's cool and encourages players to experiment to see what choices will yield the best results. Players discover that different women prefer different body types and that a look that commands "respect" from gang members may not be what's attractive to the ladies. Similarly, the San Andreas radio stations are not value-neutral. As one player wrote, "the music, like other facets of the game (weapons, clothes, groupies), creates a level of connoisseurship in defining your character as a true avatar" (Drew Massey, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 22-26).

The songs on the *San Andreas* dial are unchanged from their real-world versions, but DJ patter and station ads provide plenty of cues as to the coolness quotient of each station. If players tune in to K-DST, San Andreas's classic

rock station, they hear a station ID that proclaims, "Anyone can play songs about abusing drugs and women, but we've been doing it successfully for twenty-two years" (gameplay notes, 22 May 2006). The DJ on Radio X, the alternative rock station, is a self-absorbed, disaffected slacker, a stereotypical privileged Gen-Xer; she complains about a "rap crisis," demonstrates her lameness by mangling the names of two rappers who are characters in the game, and suggests that being a gangster sounds like way too much work—she'd rather stare at candles all day (gameplay notes, 30 July 2006). Choosing the house music on SFUR (San Fierro Underground Radio) means allying oneself with a flamboyant, arrogant German DJ: "I love you San Fierro! ... Hug me, all of you! ... I'm really mashed in here. I've not been this mashed since I was in India, communing with nature by hanging out with other people who had dropped out of work. Now we have a real record, coming at you from deep in the underground like a burst of magma!" (transcribed from recorded gameplay). On the modern hip-hop station, however, an earnest and knowledgeable-sounding DJ promises only the freshest and most authentic gangsta rap—"N.W.A. expressing the reality of that West Coast life, man ... We get the music first, before anybody gets it. We locked to the streets" (gameplay notes, 21 January 2006). In this way *San Andreas* provides substantial guidance for players' sense of what constitutes good taste, authentic music, and a gangsta aesthetic—but it leaves them free to choose classic rock over classic hip-hop if that's what they prefer.

Hearing with CJ's Ears

> Today I had to take CJ to the barbershop—he'd been told to get a haircut and some appropriate gang colors, green for Grove Street. His friend Big Smoke took him to their old barber, or rather CJ drove Smoke's car (CJ always gets to drive). Smoke had his car radio tuned to classic funk, on "Bounce FM," and the elderly black barber was listening to the classic soul station in his shop. There's a lot of old music in this game, more than I expected. And after hearing Charles Wright's "Express Yourself" in the barbershop, the samples in N.W.A.'s "Express Yourself" jumped right out at me from the gangsta rap station. (Gameplay notes, 9 May 2006)

What kind of music would CJ listen to? It isn't hard to guess, given that the game shows us what his friends and siblings play in their cars and homes. Through characters like the local barber, we also learn what his parents' generation might have preferred. Other characters don't react to the music CJ chooses, but they do demonstrate their own tastes by example. A Chicano gang plays Cypress Hill. A young black DJ with a sound system in the back of her van plays the grrl-power rock band L7 for a beach party, but the van's radio is tuned to classic hip-hop. Each time I attempted a particular drive-by

shooting mission, my car radio switched to the gangsta rap station with no input from me—an apparent programming glitch, but a cue to the player nevertheless. My survey respondents were very much aware of these connections. As one man wrote, "The game has a lot of socioeconomic themes, and the early 90s gangsta rap on Radio Los Santos frames a lot of the issues that the characters experience in a deeper way than the cut-scenes can. There's also—I think intentionally—a humorous bit of stereotyping when you steal a vehicle in that the station seems be tuned to what the driver would likely be listening to; ie, a pickup truck in the country will be tuned to KROSE" (Morgan, Virginia, 22-26).

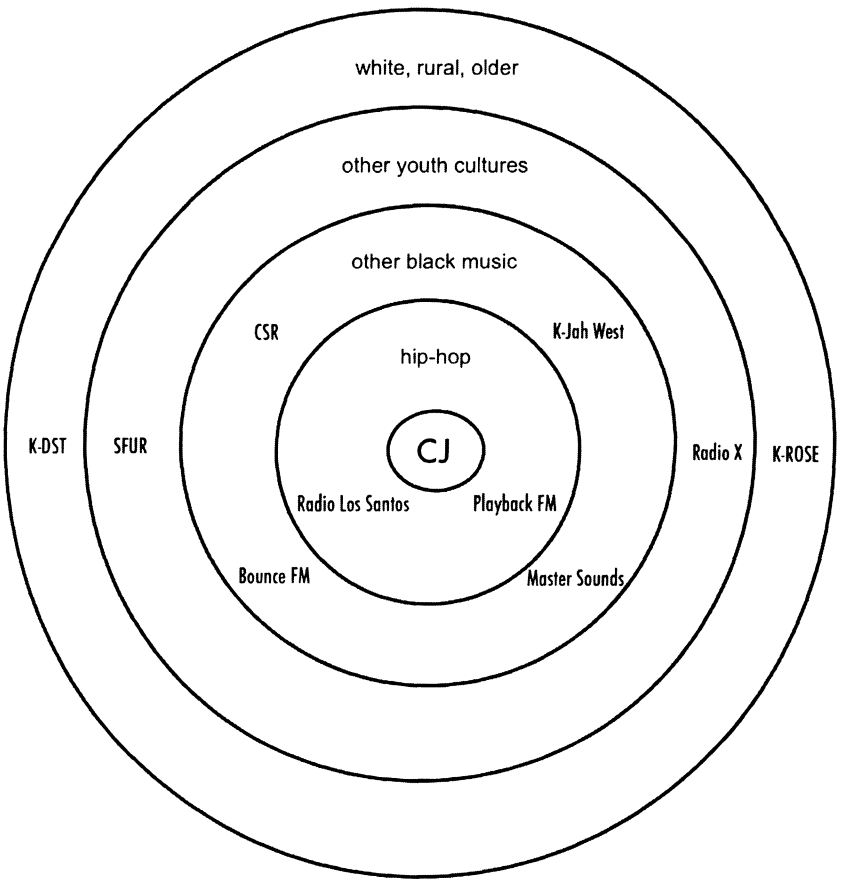
The San Andreas radio stations encompass enough genres to appeal to the tastes of a wide range of players, and those genres are explicitly linked to the tastes of a wide range of in-game characters. When CJ carjacks drivers in different areas, the victim's taste often matches the locale—country and rock out in the sticks, urban music in the inner city. But regardless of the genre, the radio seems to encourage players to listen with CJ's ears. The DJ patter on different stations falls along a spectrum from the intensely satirical to the relatively sincere, with the music CJ would take seriously receiving more respectful presentation. Dan Houser and Lazlow's scriptwriting invites listeners to mock the campy house DJ, to be amused and perplexed by the outlandish remarks of the country DJ, to be annoyed by the moody, cooler-than-thou alternative rock DJ, and to engage with the hip-hop stations that provide such good driving music and lessons on the early '90s West Coast rap canon.

Players have their own opinions about the genres on the *San Andreas* dial, and most will have previous experience with some of the songs. It is the contextualizing material that encourages players to listen as CJ would: the DJs, the ads, and the kinds of people who listen to each station in the gameworld. San Andreas DJs often discuss or directly address gang members and rappers, or at least that's what CJ hears. They may reproach or revile his social scene, but they acknowledge its existence and its currency: the classic hip-hop station promises "music from a time when your skills on the mike were more important than the size of your Gat," while the alternative rock DJ sighs, "Living in the suburbs is *so* much worse than the ghetto" (transcribed from recorded gameplay). CJ listens from the center of his own social world, as we all do, and hears the radio speak to him. As Jody Berland writes, "It is through [the DJ's] voice that the community hears itself constituted, through that voice that radio assumes authorship of the community, woven into itself through its jokes, its advertisements, its gossip, all represented, recurringly and powerfully, as the map of local life" (1994:185). *San Andreas* dramatizes the subjectivity of particular listeners as they encounter those radio voices.

Figure 1 suggests one way of thinking about "hearing with CJ's ears": it

shows how the San Andreas stations tend to create a musical world marked by black/white, urban/rural, youth culture/older, and contemporary/classic dichotomies. Here my placement of the house/techno station, SFUR (San Fierro Underground Radio), merits further explanation. While "house" is something of a big-tent genre classification at this point, the vast majority of the names on SFUR's playlist are well-known African-American artists, mostly with Chicago house credentials (e.g., Marshall Jefferson, Mr. Fingers, Frankie Knuckles, Joe Smooth, Maurice). But the Eurotrash DJ "Hans Oberlander" makes it clear that CJ would not hear SFUR as a black music station. For example, at one point the DJ suggests that an "ethnic track" reminds him of "backpacking and getting serious food poisoning. Ja, you really get to know the toilet early in the Third World" (transcribed from recorded gameplay). Like Radio

Figure 1. CJ's Listening Subjectivity.



X—the alternative rock station with the whiny (and implicitly white) female DJ—SFUR represents a youth culture unappealing to CJ. Thinking about the radio in this way might also explain what one player called "the glaring lack of a Spanish-language channel" in *San Andreas. Vice City's* Miami had such a station, as this man noted, and "It seems to be a big oversight that there isn't one for a fictional California" (anonymous male, 31-35). Indeed, two hits by Cypress Hill and Kid Frost provide the only nod to Chicano music in all of *San Andreas.* But this game depicts substantial tensions between black and Chicano communities, while also presenting a narrative thread in which CJ gradually becomes close friends with a Chicano character who is dating his sister. It would be difficult to script a radio station whose tone shifted to match this character development.

The value spectrum of the San Andreas stations is evident not only in scriptwriting but in casting choices: the country, house, and alternative rock DJs are played by professional voice actors in ultra-parody mode, while the hip-hop, contemporary soul, funk, and dub DJs are all famous representatives of those genres. Radio Los Santos is closest to the center of CJ's cultural world, and that station's DJ also provides the most direct bridge to the real world: he is Julio G, a real-life radio DJ who played groundbreaking West Coast gangsta rap on L.A.'s KDAY in the late '80s. Julio G goes by his own name on San Andreas's "modern hip hop" station, bringing gangsta rap and G-funk to Los Santos. Meanwhile, Chuck D of Public Enemy is "Forth Right MC" on Playback FM; well known for his activism and political engagement, he lends considerable credibility and a dash of comedic self-righteousness to this "classic hip-hop" station. George Clinton goes by the name "The Funktipus" as host of the classic funk station. Michael Bivins of New Edition and Bell Biv Devoe heads up the contemporary soul station, while the legendary reggae production team Sly & Robbie speak for K-Jah West. Finally, the classic rock station K-DST presents a special case: the DJ is played by Axl Rose, who certainly qualifies as famous, but his script is tedious, his performance falls flat, and he presides over a list of extremely overplayed songs (e.g., Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Free Bird" and Eddie Money's "Two Tickets to Paradise"—CJ would be familiar with the K-DST songs, one imagines, but would not be a fan). All the DJs who are real-life musical artists can point to their own music somewhere on the San Andreas dial; presumably this was part of their contracts. Several players have suggested to me that Axl Rose's work on K-DST is the only possible explanation for the presence of a Guns N' Roses song on Radio X, the alternative rock station.

Master Sounds, which plays mostly classic soul, does not have a famous soul artist at the microphone; the DJ there is voiced by black comedian Ricky Harris. However, Master Sounds has special authoritative status in San Andreas for other reasons. At least eight of its eighteen songs have been sampled in

songs that appear on the San Andreas hip-hop and contemporary soul stations (see Table 2). Moreover, just about all eighteen have been sampled by San Andreas soundtrack artists at some point in their careers.[12] In the two cases where the hip-hop song and the classic source share a title—"Express Yourself" by Charles Wright/N.W.A. and "I Know You Got Soul" by Bobby Byrd/Eric B. & Rakim—the connection would be hard to miss for even a casual listener. A station ID drives the point home: "Master Sounds FM. [female voice:] The only place you can hear the original before it got sampled and some jive turkey started chanting over it and not paying royalties—hey, where's my bread, man? [male voice:] When you're done stealing beats, gangstas, listen to Master Sounds" (transcribed from recorded gameplay). This station is explicitly presented as a hip-hop history lesson. Its songs come straight out of the "mom-and-pop crates" described by Joseph Schloss: early hip-hop artists often got their starting material from their parents' vinyl collections, and "mom-and-pop crates" have come to comprise "a certain core of well-known records,

Table 2. Cross-Station Sampling from the "Master Sounds" Playlist

Source artist/song	SA radio station	SA artist/song
Charles Wright (1970) "Express Yourself"	Radio Los Santos	N.W.A. (1989) "Express Yourself"
Bobby Byrd (1971) "I Know You Got Soul"	Playback FM	Eric B. & Rakim (1987) "I Know you Got Soul"
Bobby Byrd (1971) "Hot Pants"	CSR	Johnny Gill (1990) "Rub You the Right Way"
Bob James (1974) "Nautilus"	Playback FM	Slick Rick (1988) "Children's Story"
Maceo & the Macks (1974) "Soul Power 74"	Playback FM	Spoonie Gee (1987) "The Godfather"
Lyn Collins (1972) "Think (About It)"	Playback FM	Slick Rick (1988) "Children's Story"
	Playback FM	Rob Base & DJ EZ Rock (1988) "It Takes Two"
	CSR	Boyz II Men (1991) "Motownphilly"
The J.B.'s (1972) "Grunt"	Playback FM	Public Enemy (1988) "Rebel Without A Pause"
	Playback FM	Eric B. & Rakim (1987) "I Know You Got Soul"
James Brown (1974) "The Payback"	CSR	En Vogue (1992) "My Lovin' (Never Gonna Get It)"
	Radio Los Santos	Da Lench Mob (1992) "Guerillas in tha Mist"

generally those that were popular with urban African American listeners in the 1970s" (Schloss 2004:82).

Many of the songs on the classic funk station Bounce FM also have iconic status as sample sources, though the presentation there is more party-oriented than didactic—freaky, not teachy. A comprehensive review of the *San Andreas* soundtrack for the gamer website *IGN.com* listed over forty artists who have sampled the Ohio Players' "Funky Worm" (1972), among them nearly all of San Andreas's hip-hop artists (Spence D. 2004). This song's warbly, squelchy, high-pitched synthesizer sound—produced by a mono synth with portamento and resonance effects—became a signature sound of G-funk hip-hop; thus "Funky Worm" now has West Coast/G-funk associations for certain listeners, though the Players were in fact from Dayton, Ohio. Other widely sampled songs on Bounce FM with special place-resonance for San Andreas include Kool & the Gang's "Hollywood Swingin'" (1973) and Ronnie Hudson's L.A. car-culture anthem "West Coast Poplock" (1982). The latter's lyric reference to the "city of Compton" was featured by N.W.A. in the seminal West Coast track "Straight Outta Compton" (1988), which would have to be numbered among the state of San Andreas's foundational cultural texts.[13]

References to Compton and South Central L.A. are frequent on Radio Los Santos, home of "modern hip-hop." This station's version of what's "modern" is actually what's local: some of the songs are as old as those on Playback FM, but they are all by West Coast artists. Members of N.W.A. had a hand in eleven of the station's sixteen tracks, and contributions by groups like Compton's Most Wanted and Cypress Hill further establish the connection to L.A.[14] Radio Los Santos continually confirms the relationship between Compton and "Ganton," CJ's home neighborhood. For example, as the player drives through foggy streets, DJ Julio G links Da Lench Mob's "Guerillas in tha Mist" (1992)—which depicts South Central as a literal jungle—to the current Los Santos weather: "Today coming to work I came through this thick, thick fog, for like ten minutes, and it was crazy, man. And so what I did, I went to the back seat, got my Lench Mob CD, and I put this one in. I was thinking about y'all, so I'm gonna play it again for all y'all. 'Guerillas in tha Mist,' it's the Lench Mob y'all" (transcribed from recorded gameplay).

This dense web of interconnected songs writes the history and shapes the cultural landscape of the state of San Andreas, always reaching beyond the borders of the gameworld to make connections with real-life songs, cities, and musical canons.[15] While the radio puts forward "classics" in many genres, it is African-American music that receives the richest, most thorough, and most historically-aware treatment. In San Andreas, "Rap music is a school system itself, and one of the best school systems that we have," as Ice Cube has said (Ice Cube and Davis 1992:189). Hearing through CJ's ears means hearing those musical connections and their associated cultural history as a

part of everyday life, as the background music for barbershops, house parties, dance clubs—and for drive-by shootings.

Place, Taste, and Character

What do players make of San Andreas's musical soundscape and CJ's relationship to it? One answer is that players who normally listen to alternative rock start listening to rap, because that's what CJ would do. They decide that inhabiting a character means acquiring his tastes, and they follow the game's cues in making the consumer choices of a stereotypical young black gang member. When I asked players "Do you think music has any effect on how you relate to your character or other characters in the game?" virtually all of the positive answers referred to rap and *San Andreas* (even though all these respondents had played other GTA games and referred to them in responses to other questions).

> Absolutely, all the hip hop/rap type of music, even though I'm not a fan of it, help[s] me to become more immersed in the game. (Anonymous male, 31-35)
>
> i wouldn't usually listen to Rap, and only do ingame because CJ would. (Anonymous male, teens)
>
> Yes. The rap music in SA seems to fit the best to the game's situations and I feel that it is the most appropriate music to play while performing anti-social behaviour. (Scott, Canada, 22-26)

Another respondent reported that while he personally doesn't listen according to CJ's perceived tastes, his brother does: "i had on the rock station, and he changed it and said 'my nigga wouldn't listen to that'" (followup email correspondence).

Players need not rely on stereotypes to associate CJ with rap; along with all the gangsta-oriented talk on the radio, the game provides cut-scene dialogue that establishes CJ's preferences. In an early mission CJ tells another character, the aspiring rapper OG Loc, "I really ain't into rap no more, I'm more into that hardcore gangsta shit." This suggests that even Playback FM might not be quite to CJ's taste—which would explain why Chuck D's script on that station comes across as a bit preachy, focused on asserting what constitutes "classic hip-hop" rather than playing what's edgy, local, and true to CJ's experience. Meanwhile, the Radio Los Santos playlist starts with 2Pac's "I Don't Give a Fuck," which Julio G identifies as brand-new (adding that he is bound to get a fine for the foul language). This song and the others on Radio Los Santos virtually write the script of *San Andreas,* with their focus on West Coast locations, hostile cops, black-on-black crime, and the inexorable everyday grind of violence: "just another day in the life," says 2Pac (1991).

But while many players associate gangsta rap with CJ or his activities—

they listen to Radio Los Santos because that's what CJ would do—other perspectives were just as common among my respondents. For one thing, since *San Andreas* provides only about ten hours of music for many tens of hours of gameplay, it's hard to imagine someone sticking to a single station for long. As a Dutch survey respondent explained,

> In the beginning of GTA San Andreas i thought, CJ is a gangster, so i listened to gangster station Radio Los Santos. After a while, i had heard all songs on that station so many times, that i wanted another station and i searched more for music i like myself, and not music i liked and which fitted the game. (Anonymous male, teens)

Several respondents suggested that they identify more closely with the avatar if he seems to share their own tastes: rather than listening with the avatar's ears, they preferred to think of the avatar as listening with theirs.

> Since the music I as a player [am] listening to is the same as the music the in-game character is listening to, it makes me feel a bit closer to him, whereas a more traditional soundtrack would create a layer of distance. (David Newgreen, Melbourne, Australia, 18–21)

> [I] relate to CJ better because there's more rock stuff, if it was purely rap, which I don't mind, but it would get boring, it would be a less involving game. (Anonymous female, United Kingdom, 18–21)

> I think the radio helps me to identify more with the character that I am controlling in the game. I am more convinced that he is like me if I can not only control most of his actions, but also what kind of music he listens to. If he stole a car and Creed was on the radio and he didn't change it, that would serve to ruin the illusion. (Kevin McCoy, Ferndale, Michigan, 22–26)

Finally, whether or not they associated some of GTA's music with particular game characters, nearly all the survey respondents connected the radio with the gameworld's historical setting, locations, and their own emotional states during gameplay.

Since the vast majority of my respondents had played *Vice City* before playing *San Andreas,* they were accustomed to a set of radio stations that represented the gameworld's era rather than the avatar's personality. But instead of representing 1992 as a stand-alone cultural moment or the West Coast as a culturally diverse region, the *San Andreas* radio sets up the oppositions sketched in Figure 1: black/white, urban/rural, young/old, classic/contemporary. These distinctions correspond closely to different parts of the gameworld, so that players tend to match the stations to particular *San Andreas* locales and vehicles. In so doing, they follow the lead of the game designers, who made a stolen truck in the countryside most likely to be tuned to classic country or classic rock.

> Country music is more appropriate for a stolen pickup truck, or hardcore rap for a lowrider. And some of the more relaxing stations are better suited for long

> drives in the country, while others may be better suited for, y'know, doing a drive-by. (Joe, Little Rock, Arkansas, 27–30)
>
> I tend to enjoy listening to Rap in the city and the Rock stations while driving through the country. In the country, the country-western station also feels appropriate and I listened to it while driving certain vehicles such as campers and tractors. (Scott, Canada, 22–26)
>
> Radio LS is my favorite when I'm in LS, I usually listen to K-yah when in San Fierro, KDST is my desert radio station and when in Las Venturas city I particularly like listening to mastersounds. (Anonymous male, The Netherlands, 18–21)

Other players focused on the connection between music and mood: for example, linking faster, harder, more aggressive-sounding tracks to violent activities; choosing music that seemed to help them complete difficult missions; or deliberately creating surreal contrasts by mis-matching music and activity. In my own gameplay I discovered that the dub/reggae station helped me relax during high-speed car chases—other stations offered equally mellow music, but K-Jah West reminded me of the island music of my childhood in Key West, Florida. Survey respondents often reported making similar performance-enhancing choices based on their own tastes and histories. A few players who chose to listen to music from their own collections during gameplay described an increasingly strong link between particular music and particular game activities: as one survey respondent wrote, "What I did to myself, unthinkingly, was associate the sounds of Cannibal Ox with the virtual act of dangerous driving, shooting guns, and so on. So, if I was driving a friend's car, and he had put a Cannibal Ox song on the mixtape he had left in the player, I would experience what I can best describe as a game fugue; I would have the ghost of an impulse to drive the car as if I was playing the game" (anonymous male, 31–35). In some versions of the game players can create custom MP3 playlists, so that they hear their own music amid the game's radio advertisements and news bulletins—an experience that likely fosters the development of these associations. (However, my research—and Rockstar's investment in licensed content—suggests that most players thoroughly explore the existing stations first.)

Because *San Andreas* creates a sense of what constitutes appropriate music for particular places and activities, players are in a position to either pursue those associations or subvert them. As a survey respondent wrote,

> I choose my stations based upon what I plan on doing. If I'm thinking about going on a crazy car chase, then I'll choose the appropriate high-energy station. If all I want to do is drive around and admire the scenery, I'll switch over to whatever relaxing yet interesting station there is. Of course, I could always do the opposites; there's great control given to the player, since we can change the mood of our given actions however we'd like. (Robert Salazar, Texas, 18–21)

In conversation and survey responses, players often brought up these pos-

sibilities when discussing drive-by shooting missions—a hallmark of the *San Andreas* driving experience. One player suggested that the radio "gives a much higher level of immersion versus other games, it's nice to do drive bys while listening to Dr Dre sing 'Nuttin but a G thing'" (anonymous male, 31-35). Another reported, "Sometimes I like to use the country station on San Andreas while doing a drive-by because it's so surreal" (Mike Berezowsky, Edmonton, Canada, 27-30). These players know what kind of music is supposed to go with mass-media depictions of ghetto violence; they enjoy being able to choose whether to comply with those norms or to create a sense of cognitive dissonance.

This is not to say that all players are inclined to critique these stereotypes, of course. Some use Radio Los Santos for drive-bys because it strikes them as the realistic thing to do. But *San Andreas* encourages experimentation with other musical options, thereby leading some players to think about how certain kinds of music become linked to certain kinds of people in media representations. Perhaps CJ, too, would get bored with Radio Los Santos's limited playlist after a while.

As players explore the choices on the *San Andreas* dial—with all their potential links to mood, character, activities, and locale—they develop a relationship with unfamiliar genres and artists that often leads to real-life purchases or downloads. My survey asked: "Has the GTA radio changed any of your listening/music-purchasing habits? Has it increased your interest in any particular artist or genre?" Over 65% of respondents gave affirmative replies.

> I downloaded most of the game's soundtrack after completing the game. I also feel connected to the game and the game's play when I listen to certain songs from the game during everyday activity. In particular, I have begun listening to a great deal of "gangsta rap" such as Cyprus Hill, Ice Cube, and Easy E [artist names *sic*]. I have also sought out music produced by many of the bands whose music was present in the game (including Pearl Jam, Tom Petty, etc). (Scott, Canada, 22-26)
>
> It's probably broadened my appreciation of both country music and reggae. (Joe, Little Rock, Arkansas, 27-30)
>
> Although I'd enjoyed in passing some of the 90's gangsta rap, it wasn't until I really got to know the songs in the game that I started tracking down the albums from N.W.A. and Ice Cube and the like, which of course led to finding more contemporary political hip-hop. I think the repetition of the songs also made my ears more attenuated to hearing the rapped lyrics more easily. (Morgan, Virginia, 22-26)
>
> Being exposed to "classic hip-hop" has increased my awareness of the genre, and I'm giving the buyer at my local record store fits trying to buy ancient hip-hop on vinyl. (Anonymous male, 31-35)

I have also discovered evidence of GTA-driven purchases in many Amazon.com user reviews of particular albums, particularly those associated with Radio

Los Santos and Playback FM. Wikipedia entries and other general-information websites on the musical artists featured in *Vice City* and *San Andreas* often mention that a particular song can be found in the games or on their spin-off soundtrack box-sets. GTA's playlists have led players to seek out re-issues of music from their childhoods and to investigate the historical roots of country, rap, reggae, and rock.

Here it is important to remember that the licensed music on the radio constitutes the only direct product placement in *San Andreas.* While the gameworld is rife with billboards, retail stores, radio advertisements, cars, and clothes that parody real products—from the Urban Outfitters knock-off "Sub Urban" to an antidepressant called "Grin"—only musical artists and the DJ Julio G are directly imported from real life and appear under their real names. In the *San Andreas* instruction booklet/tourist guide, too, there are advertisements for all kinds of fictional in-game businesses, but the only real ads are for music. Amid the fake ads for "Caligula's Casino" and "Ammu-Nation" ("for all your daily firearm needs"), full-page ads from fictional record stores reproduce real album covers under the heading "The hottest hits on sale this weekend": 2Pac's *2pacalypse Now* (1991), Boyz II Men's *Cooleyhighharmony* (1993), *Appetite for Destruction* by Guns N' Roses (1990), and Public Enemy's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1988), among others. At the end of the tourist-guide section, just before the game credits, Capitol Records gets a two-page ad spread with no contextualizing references to the gameworld: the covers of Ice Cube's *Death Certificate* (1991), Eazy-E's *Eazy-Duz-It* (1988), and N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton* (1988) appear opposite coming-in-2004 releases by Houston, Chingy, and Don Yute.

With its ability to deliver multimedia content to millions of players around the world, Rockstar Games is an attractive partner for record companies. Given that many Rockstar staff members have professional backgrounds in music promotion, label management, and music video production, the company is in a position to make the most of this synergistic potential. Its gameworld playlists must be analyzed with this in mind. However, it should be noted that many players are aware of the licensing/marketing issue and have praised Rockstar's choices in this arena, in terms of both playlists and editing. As a survey respondent wrote,

> The main difference [between GTA and other games]: they openly drop the F bomb . . . Nothing kills me more than dead air in the middle of a song because the developer wanted to retain their T for Teen rating while still including some hot edgy song on their playlist. The music is also mostly songs you don't normally hear. An EA [Electronic Arts] sports title, for example, will include whatever is popular and current. The radio in GTA includes tracks which are both relevant to the era, but tracks and bands that you don't normally hear or do not normally get any air play. (Matthew, Keokuk, Iowa, 22–26)

Straight Outta Ganton: A Hip-Hop Industry Story

As I conducted my virtual fieldwork in Vice City and the state of San Andreas, my sense of the musical cultures of these simulacra societies emerged not only from the songs on the radio but from the gameworlds' representation of the commercial music industry. GTA's designers successfully market music to players while implicitly critiquing the mass media star system and its promotional machinery. Rock-star, rapper, and band-manager characters interact closely with Tommy Vercetti and CJ, and some of them are interviewed or discussed by in-game radio DJs—a practice that blurs the line between satirical and sincere music promotion on the GTA radio. While the metal band Lovefist provides Spinal-Tap-style comic interest in *Vice City,* in *San Andreas* a more complicated music industry story is woven through the narrative: the tale of the rappers OG Loc and Madd Dogg.

As Soraya Murray has observed, San Andreas is set just at the leading edge of the bling-bling, hyper-commercialized rap era which has been excoriated not only by the moral-panic crowd but by many ardent hip-hop supporters (2005:96). I have already suggested that the contrast between Playback FM and Radio Los Santos underscores and historicizes this transitional moment, shoring up CJ's distinction between ordinary rap and "hardcore gangsta." But gangsta rap itself has two faces in *San Andreas,* personified by the ambitious, inept Jeffrey Cross, who has taken the name of "OG Loc" (voiced by the actor Jonathan "Jas" Anderson), and the successful rapper Madd Dogg (voiced by Ice T, whose music is conspicuously absent from the Radio Los Santos playlist).

Jeffrey/OG Loc is a young man from CJ's neighborhood, probably a teenager. We first meet him when he is released from a short prison term, which he sought out for the express purpose of increasing his street cred as a rapper. His prison comportment has been less than gangsta, however—as CJ's brother tells another character, "You know Jeffrey's been somebody's bitch for the past three weeks, right?" In cut-scenes, CJ and his fellow workaday gang members are half-amused and half-disgusted by Loc's showy gold chains, tattoos, and awkward attempts at ghetto slang; they often forget to use his rapper name and revert to calling him "Jeffrey." Before long Loc enlists CJ to help him find and kill his prison boyfriend, thereby eliminating the risks that kind of sexual history would pose to his rap career. CJ has his own reasons for doing jobs for Loc; his older brother, Sweet, constantly questions CJ's commitment to the Grove Street Families, and these missions provide a means to regain Sweet's trust.

OG Loc practices his rapping while he works as a "sanitation technician" at a fast-food chain called Burger Shot, where he has to wear a humiliating burger-shaped hat and do unpleasant jobs like cleaning the deep-fryer. He persuades CJ to steal a sound system so that he can throw a party to promote

his first record; at the party, CJ and his friends wince at Loc's terrible rhymes. Shortly thereafter, CJ visits Loc as he cleans the Burger Shot men's room:

> [Loc is mopping the floor in his burger hat.]
> Loc: Hey hey hey, it's OG Loc, homie, and I'm gonna kick a little something like this. Hey yo, when I come through up in the place, you don't want me to come with a gun in your face. I spit it harder than anyone in the world could do ...
> CJ: Hey dude, you ever thought about getting a writer to help you out with this shit?
> Loc: Yeah I did, but who, homie, who?
> CJ: Shit, I ain't in the rap game, you know that ain't my thing. But um, we have to think about something. Man.
> Loc: How 'bout if I get somebody to write something for me, only they didn't know about it? ... I think I just might have found a ghost writer. I'll become the reciter, all nighter, all righter—Madd Dogg's rhyme book, from his home in the hills.
> CJ: Madd Dogg's rhyme book?!
> Loc: Man, you said you'd help, Carl. Come on, man. I'm hot, like fire all nighter all righter, when I kick it—
> CJ: Hey! I'll do anything, homie, I swear that. 'kay? (Cut-scene transcribed from recorded gameplay)

CJ sets off to steal Madd Dogg's book of rhymes for Loc, in a storyline that reminds players of the written-out literary qualities of rap lyrics and the aesthetic distinctions between good and bad flow. But the mission also shows them a successful rapper's gigantic, near-empty mansion in a boring nouveau-riche neighborhood, far from the active street life of Ganton. When CJ sneaks into the barely-furnished house, Madd Dogg is sitting alone playing videogames while armed guards patrol the markers of his financial achievements.[16] This is the lifestyle that signifies commercial success—"I write my rhyme as I cool in my mansion," as Rakim raps on Playback FM in "I Know You Got Soul" (Eric B. & Rakim 1987). It certainly looks a lot better than OG Loc's job at Burger Shot. Still, CJ's life as a real gang member trumps them both with its independence, authenticity, and community connections.

No one can stand OG Loc's posturing, but he becomes famous anyway. After CJ gives him the rhyme book and drives Madd Dogg's manager off a pier, OG Loc begins to get mentioned on the radio. Soon we hear him interviewed by Lazlow on "Entertaining America," a mainstream talk-radio show—clearly a big break.

> OG Loc: I'm ice cold, bitch. Don't let me dump on you, G. I'm the streets, man, I am *gangsta*. I'm taking rap in a whole new direction ...
> Lazlow: Why do you rappers get so worked up? You're rich! You've won! Stop shooting at each other. You know, and you keep saying "I'm from the streets." You know what, dude, everyone has a street in front of their house. That doesn't make you cool.

OG Loc: Oh, we've got a comedian, huh. You got straps, bitch, huh, you down? You punk, trick, busta, fool!
Lazlow: Look, I don't know what you said, but here, this oughtta calm you down, I brought you some malt liquor.
OG Loc: You's a busta fool. Lucky I don't hang you out the window or turn you out, cause I'm also a pimp. Including dudes, I'll pimp anything, y'hear me?
Lazlow: Oh! Dude I hear you loud and clear . . . Please, don't shoot me, homie!
OG Loc: Relax fool, no one's getting dumped on. I'm a warrior poet, I tell a cautionary tale about life on the streets, you know?
Lazlow: Only too well. That was OG Loc—hey man, it's been a real pleasure. Straight. Yeah. Good luck with the music . . .
Announcer: So *that's* how *you're* going to be entertained. (Transcribed from recorded gameplay)

As OG Loc becomes more and more of a sell-out gangsta stereotype, subjecting himself to condescending and racist media treatment, Madd Dogg's career is destroyed. When CJ next encounters him, Madd Dogg is a burnt-out drug addict, about to commit suicide by jumping off a building. (In accordance with GTA's signature dark humor, the player has to rescue him by maneuvering a truck to catch him when he falls.) Guilt-stricken, CJ sends Madd Dogg to rehab and offers to become his manager. They return to Los Santos together, recover the mansion from drug dealers, and commence recording some new tracks. The in-house recording studio is detailed and realistic: one player was certain he recognized Yamaha NS10 studio monitor speakers and a Tascam DA-88 digital multitrack recorder.[17]

By this time CJ has completed missions in the rural countryside, San Fierro/San Francisco, and Las Venturas/Las Vegas. He has developed excellent business relationships in several industries and has demonstrated his ability to move in many social circles, rather than being mired in the mean streets of Ganton. When he does a favor for a government agent, earning Sweet an early release from prison, CJ is excited to share his accomplishments with his brother. But Sweet is apparently as disappointed in CJ as ever.

CJ: Hey man, we're off to our new spot. We got a mansion, Sweet! We been puttin' in work, and shit is goin' *well.* We got a stake in a casino, we got some insane shit in [San] Fierro, we gettin' into the rap game! Hey man, let me get you some new clothes, come on! . . .
Sweet: You never *did* get it, did you Carl? I need to go check on things in the hood. Man that's the problem, you're always a perpetrator, runnin' from what's *real* . . .
CJ: Man, what the hood done for me? Always draggin' *me* down. Ever since I *got* out the hood shit been crackin'! That's everybody dream, to get out the hood . . . A'ight man. You hard. I'm gonna *show* you what's going on in the hood . . . (Cut-scene transcribed from recorded gameplay)

The player must drive Sweet to Ganton, where the brothers encounter a drug addict trying to sell them their own mother's blender. CJ says, "Look

like baseheads have took over the spot. Let's go home." Sweet's reply is swift and furious: "This *is* home, man . . . You was born in there!"

CJ's apparent freedom is constrained by this moral pressure from his brother, here and throughout the game. Rather than leaving Ganton behind, he has to resume a leadership role in the Grove Street Families and help clean up the neighborhood (eventually killing an old friend who has become a drug kingpin). Madd Dogg gets a new contract from a white man at "Blastin' Fools Records"; by the end of the game he is back on track for the life described by Too $hort on Radio Los Santos, where "Even though they put us down and call us animals / We make real big banks and buy brand new clothes / Drive fancy cars, make love to stars / Never really saying just who we are" (1990). But CJ's future is unclear; even after he defeats the game's villains and the *San Andreas* credits roll, the player can continue with free-form gameplay. What's obvious is that CJ is compelled to stay committed to Ganton. Despite his explorations of the whole state of San Andreas, in the end his is the story told by Compton's Most Wanted in "Hood Took Me Under": "A nigga can't escape the gangs and the dope . . . / Cause when you grow up in the hood, you gots to claim a set. / Yeah, it's not that you want to but you have to" (1992). Sincerely or ironically, this dramatic conclusion has a strong anti-drug and "family values" message. It brings to mind the plots of blaxploitation films, with their "peculiar mix of fantasy and pragmatism, whereby criminal behaviour is at once commended and deplored" (Demers 2003:42).

In tracing the intersecting careers of OG Loc, Madd Dogg, and CJ, *San Andreas* cites the foundational narratives and central dramatic conflicts of gangsta rap. As Eithne Quinn writes, this genre was created by artists who were "at pains to expose and critically engage [gangsta rap's] own commercial impetus and commodified status" (Quinn 2005:5). Commercialism and the co-option of stereotypes could be seen as just part of being a good hustler, making a living by any means necessary. OG Loc's methodical steps to industry success—spending a little time in prison, proving his "hardness" with violence, appropriating another MC's rhymes, and pimping himself out to the mainstream media—present a merciless portrait of that kind of hustle. bell hooks has associated this phenomenon with what she calls the "shift in class values" in African American life that came with "the idea that money is the primary marker of individual success, not how one acquires money" (hooks 2004:19); she critiques mainstream hip-hop culture as "just a black minstrel show—an imitation of dominator desire, not a rearticulation, not a radical alternative" (ibid.:152).

In *San Andreas,* too, money is a key measure of success; players earn dollars, not points. But at the same time, CJ's relationships with OG Loc, Madd Dogg, and Sweet pull him in different directions. As Tricia Rose notes, "The hood is not a generic designation" (Rose 1994b:10); or to use Sweet's

terms, "You was born in there." CJ must negotiate the conflicting demands of financial ambition, loyalty to friends and family, and dedication to authentic street life in a particular neighborhood, while also dealing with a racist, corrupt police force and the predations of violent drug dealers and rival gangs. This is a story told many times in rap lyrics: both sensationalist and didactic, it presents "an utterly complete index of social ills" (Wheeler 1991:205). (Wheeler uses these terms to describe the 1982 Grandmaster Flash classic "The Message," which appears on *Vice City's* pirate rap station and is remixed as Ice Cube's "Check Yo Self" on Radio Los Santos.)

Rockstar's designers clearly aimed for a hip-hop aesthetic in creating *San Andreas.* They not only drew on their own experience in the music business but hired writers, consultants, and voice actors with strong hip-hop affiliations. DJ Pooh—a frequent Ice Cube collaborator, former producer for L.A.'s Da Lench Mob, and screenwriter for the classic ghetto comedy *Friday*—is one of only three credited writers for *San Andreas.* West coast hip-hop photographer/music video director Estevan Oriol contributed to the visual design of the game, as did Mexican-American tattoo-artist-to-the-stars Mister Cartoon. Setting aside the in-game radio DJs, hip-hop artists who play named characters in the *San Andreas* cast include Ice T, Yo-Yo, MC Eiht, The Game, and Kid Frost. CJ himself is played by an aspiring West Coast rapper, Chris Bellard (Young Maylay), who has now released an album based on his *San Andreas* experience (Young Maylay 2005). This extensive hip-hop pedigree gives *San Andreas* a consistent aesthetic "feel" that ties together the game's visual design, characters, dialogue, cut-scene editing, musical content, and narrative—all of which sample from other media sources.

Rockstar's design choices both positioned *San Andreas* to appeal to a particular demographic and helped forestall criticism of the game's representation of urban black life. As a preview article in *Eurogamer* explained,

> [Dan] Houser reckons that the intense level of research undertaken by the developer will see them through any uncomfortable claims of mistreatment or what-have-you. He points to a full time set of researchers, artists who visited every absurdly expensive Beverley Hills neighbourhood, every trainers-over-the-telegraph-wire ghetto cesspit with couches in the streets and gangbangers cruising past in low-riders, and everywhere in between, and the company's partnerships with the likes of LA-based photographer and street culture expert Estavan Oriol and producer/film director DJ Pooh. (Bramwell 2004)

The game designers' efforts in this area have striking affinities with the methods employed by folklore collectors, ethnographers, and museum curators (Miller forthcoming). However, the resulting multimedia exhibit of vernacular culture deliberately juggles earnestness and irony in a manner uncharacteristic of those other representational enterprises. *San Andreas* is driven by Signifyin(g) practices, like hip-hop itself (Gates 1988; Wheeler 1991). The

game shares what Tricia Rose has described as the "fundamentally literate and deeply technological" character of rap, whose artists "reshuffle known cultural formulas and themes" to generate new and compelling narratives (Rose 1994b:95, 88).

The *San Andreas* radio stations and its music industry stories encourage players to draw conclusions about CJ's motivations and cultural history as they relate to the nature of authentic hip-hop. Canonical rap tracks that closely match the game's time and place give *San Andreas* intertextual richness and historical depth. One survey respondent wrote, "I find that it is one of those things that really made me feel like it WAS that time. Having Dr. Dre blasting while you watch black people being chased by white cops shows a very strong message" (anonymous male, 18). At the same time, the radio helps preserve the delicate balance of gritty realism and comic camp that has made *Grand Theft Auto* so successful and so controversial. As another teenaged respondent explained,

> the radio makes the game feel overall more realistic but with the funny and cartoon-esque dialogue of the radio hosts it enforces the un-realistic nature of the game. in a sense, u feel that u can really do these things for one moment then u realize its impossible (only when u think about [it], before that i can escape from reality in the game). (Ben, Ontario, Canada)

These young men were small children in 1992, the year represented in *San Andreas.* In 2004, the year of the game's release, they were playing in defiance of its age rating. They're exactly the kind of impressionable youths that critics say should not be immersed in GTA's virtual worlds, called "virtual reality murder simulators" by the activist/attorney Jack Thompson in a recent lawsuit.[18] But my ethnographic research suggests that while *San Andreas* does have very violent content, it is also communicating some complex historical, political, and ethical lessons about hip-hop, consumerism, and the life circumstances of characters who find themselves choosing between deep fryers, criminal pursuits, and musical entrepreneurship. OG Loc's frustration with his dead-end Burger Shot job is palpable, while Madd Dogg's career is subject to the whims of a fickle, exploitative music industry. Such stories are enshrined in early gangsta rap—recall Ice Cube's "A Bird in the Hand," which describes a McDonald's job in withering terms and asks, "Do I gotta go sell me a whole lotta crack / For decent shelter and clothes on my back?" (1991). Stories like these do indeed "show a very strong message."

To the extent that *San Andreas* is historical, it adheres to Hayden White's dictum that "every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events of which it treats" (1980:18). This is particularly apparent in the game's re-creation of the 1992 L.A. riots, sparked by the acquittal of a corrupt Los Santos police officer. (Officer Tenpenny, a black

cop voiced by Samuel L. Jackson, harasses CJ throughout the game; he bears some resemblance to the nefarious Officer Coffey from *Boyz N the Hood*.) As players navigate a Los Santos filled with looters, police, and raging fires, they get a history lesson not taught in most high schools. Like the real-life songs on the radio, this real-life event has been contextualized so that players experience it from CJ's perspective; they don't learn about the traumatic experiences of L.A.'s Korean Americans, for instance, nor do they hear the L.A.P.D.'s side of the story. But while acknowledging the limited nature of this representation, I still want to suggest that it might be an eye-opening experience to go through a reenactment of the riots as a young man whose own neighborhood is burning.

Like many of its hip-hop antecedents, *San Andreas* both romanticizes and essentializes "the ghetto." At the same time, its storylines vividly depict and critique the commodification of blackness that has made "fictive accounts of underclass black life . . . more lauded, more marketable, than other visions because mainstream conservative white audiences desire these images" (hooks 1994:152). The game thereby follows Ice Cube's prescription for rap: that it should "hold up a mirror," so that "you see yourself for who you are" (Ice Cube and Davis 1992:178). But while Ice Cube's mirror was meant to confront black youth with "the things going on in the black community" (ibid.), *San Andreas's* mirror reflects a broader culture of consumerism, glorified violence, media sensationalism, and racial stereotypes. The game could hardly be credited with offering hooks's wished-for "radical alternative" in representing black life (2004:152), but it does communicate the idea that actively critiquing media representations is both politically important and endlessly entertaining. Mainstream media attacks on the GTA games have actually reinforced this message by inspiring defensive reactions from players; many GTA fans seek out political critique within the games as proof that critics have fundamentally misunderstood their purpose, intent, and cultural value (Miller forthcoming).

Non-linear "sandbox" games like those in the *Grand Theft Auto* series aim to create an open-ended, experimental gameplay experience, but their technical limitations inevitably impose constraints on players. *San Andreas* gives that play of freedom and constraint cultural specificity and logical force by requiring players to occupy a particular avatar, a young black man with a detailed personal history. Moving with CJ's body, interacting with CJ's friends, living in CJ's neighborhood, and hearing with CJ's ears all serve to suture the state of San Andreas to hip-hop culture, a well-established arena for staging conflicts between individual expressivity and oppressive restrictions. As Rose writes, "themes in rap and graffiti articulated free play and unchecked public displays, and yet the settings for these expressions always suggested existing confinement" (1994a:84). *San Andreas* drama-

tizes that counterpoint of free play and societal confinement in extreme terms, celebrating hip-hop's opportunistic creativity but also undermining the "straight outta Ganton" myth of ghetto authenticity through broad parody.

By encouraging players to experiment with the possibilities and the confining borders of CJ's world, *San Andreas* invites them to interpret its controversial content on their own terms and to investigate their own complicity with the stereotypes that govern much of the social life of the gameworld. As the Kant-quoting country DJ Mary-Beth Maybell tells them, they can choose to view themselves as "passive recipients of perception"—manipulated by advertisers, doomed to re-enact videogame violence in real life—or as "active originators of experience," equipped to appreciate irony. Cultivating this sense of in-the-know interpretive freedom has been good for business at Rockstar Games; what player would choose to identify as a passive dupe of the culture industry? But this does not diminish the fact that the makers of *Grand Theft Auto* acknowledge and capitalize on their players' creative agency, musical sensibilities, and past experiences with popular media. By jacking the dial—appropriating commercial radio to broadcast new messages—these games show how popular music transmits social history and how players' musical choices can animate and enrich their exploration of virtual worlds.

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Notes

1. "Avatar" is a widespread industry term for the game character controlled by the player. Other personalities in a game are "non-playable characters," or NPCs. The *Grand Theft Auto* games have vast numbers of NPCs, but only one avatar is available in each game (a somewhat unusual feature).

2. This figure has been widely cited; see for example the "manufacturer's description" of the GTA Trilogy Edition at http://www.amazon.co.uk and the more detailed figures cited in chairmansteve 2005.

3. The survey questions may be found at http://gtaradio.blogspot.com. All survey respondents indicated how they wished to be cited (by name, geographic location, anonymously, etc.).

I have cited players according to their preferences and have also included each player's age bracket.

4. "Mods" can only be used in the PC editions of the games (as opposed to the "console" editions, e.g., the versions for Sony's PlayStation 2).

5. Exceptions dealing with music include Smith 2004, Whalen 2004, and Demers 2006. Taylor 2006 is a pioneering ethnography of massively-mulitplayer online games (MMOGs) and their players, but does not address music or single-player games. Cognitive studies devoted to investigating music's impact on gameplay have suffered from a methodology that aspires to rigorous empiricism but relies on subjective distinctions at the level of study design (e.g., the game genre classifications in Zehnder and Lipscomb 2006).

6. I have been in touch with some Rockstar Games personnel, but as of this writing I have been waiting several months for them to obtain company clearance to answer my questions on-the-record. I therefore rely on previously published interviews when I address the designers' perspective in this article.

7. For a useful collection of these reviews, see GameStats.com 2005. Scholarly accounts of freedom and experimentation in GTA include Murray 2005, Frasca 2003, and Bogost 2005. Shira Chess acknowledges the importance of experimentation but suggests that GTA reproduces a Foucauldian penal system, in which players reaffirm societal norms and "become their own disciplining authority" (2005:86). Barker and Petley (2001) address the "media effects" debate.

8. As demonstrated here, I will italicize *Vice City* and *San Andreas* when referring to the digital games (authored multimedia texts) and use plain text when referring to the gameworld (the state of San Andreas, a bounded virtual space where the avatar lives).

9. Scientist (Hopeton Browne) subsequently sued his label, Greensleeves Records, for licensing this material, asserting that he owned the copyright for the tracks in question. Greensleeves argued that Scientist was simply a mixing engineer and the rights belonged to the producer. Wayne Marshall provides an excellent summary of the lawsuit and its implications in a series of blog postings (http://wayneandwax.blogspot.com/search?q=scientist).

10. However, one metal-loving survey respondent did notice that in a cut-scene Tommy identifies himself as a fan of Lovefist, the game's fictional metal band; the player reported saying to himself "alright, he's a metalhead" and feeling a closer connection with Tommy thereafter (Ben, Ontario, Canada, teens).

11. The dub/reggae station suggests a Black Atlantic connection (Gilroy 1993); it seems more typical of Britain's urban black culture than California's.

12. Apart from the evidence provided by my own ears, my main sources for these connections were the databases at www.the-breaks.com, www.secondhandsongs.com, and www.ishkur.com/samples.

13. That song itself does not appear in *San Andreas,* but N.W.A.'s "Express Yourself" comes from the *Straight Outta Compton* album (1988); the album is also advertised in the game's instruction booklet. Narrative elements and locale aside, the visual style of *San Andreas* and the practice of indicating gang territory through colored outlines on maps have important parallels in the "Straight Outta Compton" video (which can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/?v=QkM_N5_otl4). Gangsta rap scholar Eithne Quinn has analyzed this video and discussed the commodification of Compton as an index of gangsta authenticity (2005:77).

14. Nine tracks give primary artist credit to N.W.A., Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, the D.O.C., or Eazy-E; in addition, Dr. Dre and Ice Cube are credited as producers on the tracks by Above the Law and Da Lench Mob, respectively.

15. Several of my survey respondents mentioned that songs on the San Andreas dial are common sample sources. A German man wrote, "I noticed quite a few songs in San Andreas are the origin of samples used in modern pop songs, like Prodigy's Out Of Space [which samples "Critical Beatdown" by the Ultramagnetic MCs, on Playback FM], or a Saxophone sample used by Jennifer Lopez recently" (anonymous male, 22–26). The latter is presumably the saxophone sample from "Soul Power 74" (by Maceo & the Macks, on Master Sounds) featured in the 2005 J.Lo single "Get Right."

16. Readers can view Madd Dogg's mansion in a YouTube contributor's machinima satire of MTV's celebrity lifestyle show "Cribs" (princearsalan0001 2006).

17. The Tascam DA-88 could be considered slightly anachronistic for the gameworld, since it went to market in 1993. Alternatively, it could serve to mark Madd Dogg's equipment as cutting-edge.

18. This phrase was cited in a widely-circulated AP story about a 2006 lawsuit filed against Rockstar Games and its parent companies in connection with 14-year-old Cody Posey's 2004 shooting of several family members in New Mexico (Associated Press 2006).

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